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Abraham Lincoln

SPEECH BY

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As I contemplate Abraham Lincoln, the most impressive fact about him is this: that a child born of humble parents, in surroundings of most meagre opportunity, without even a suggestion of inspiration or of hope, of modest and diffident character, with no ambition to conquer the world or wade through slaughter to a throne, who wholly educated himself in surroundings which encouraged anything but education, should have become not merely president of this great republic but the most revered and loved and trusted of all our presidents.

If he had an uncouth physical frame, if he sometimes lapsed into the jokes and language of the countryside, these were mere incidents, for in soul he was shapely and beautiful; in the real language of his thoughts he was chaste and polished.

No man reared in an atmosphere of the finest morality and of the most rigid training had a more polished soul than he. The masters of the English tongue, educated in the greatest universities and trained by association with the most finished writers, had no more highly informed literary taste than he, and none of his contemporaries had his literary finish and force.

Where has his Gettysburg speech been matched? In its comprehensive philosophy, in its orderly procession of logical statement, in its high purposes most loftily expressed, in its humanity and its hope and its inspiration, we may well ask, where in all literature is it surpassed? And the significance of that is this: that the soul of Lincoln, in a great crisis with mighty facts, justly apprehended by him, rose to more than human height at the awe-inspiring moment.

Consider the form of his thought and phrase under less inspiring circumstances. To Horace Greeley, who supposed himself wise enough to instruct Lincoln and polished enough to have a dictatorial literary tone, Lincoln wrote, on the 22nd of August, 1862:

"I would save the union. I would save it in the shortest way under the constitution. The sooner the national authority can be restored, the nearer the union will be the union as it was. If there be those who would not save the union unless they could at the same time save slavery, I do not agree with them. If there be those who would not save the union unless they could at the same time destroy slavery, I do not agree with

them. My paramount object in this struggle is to save the union, and is not either to save or destroy slavery. If I could save the union without freeing any slave, I would do it; and if I could save it by freeing all the slaves, I would do it; and if I could save it by freeing some and leaving others alone, I would also do that. What I do about slavery and the colored race, I do because I believe it helps to save the union, and what I forbear I forbear because I do not believe it would help to save the union. I shall do less whenever I shall believe what I am doing hurts the cause, and I shall do more whenever I shall believe doing more will help the cause. I shall try to correct errors when shown to be errors, and I shall adopt new views as fast as they shall appear to be true views."

This letter contains not merely dignity, literary style and finish, but argument, convincing, unanswerable. It ended discussion.

Where did any one ever so philosophically analyze and so forcibly and clearly describe how easy it is for the differences of honest men to degenerate into violence and murder, as Lincoln did in his letter to Drake and others, October 5, 1863. The complaint had been made that General Schofield or the militia were responsible for suffering and wrong done to union men in Missouri. Said Lincoln:

"We are in a civil war. In such cases there always is a main question, but in this case the question is a perplexing compound, union and slavery. It thus becomes a question not of two sides merely, but at least four sides, even among those who are for the union saying nothing of those who are against it. Thus, those who are for the union with, but not without slavery; those for it without, but not with; those for it with or without, but prefer it with; and those for it with or without, but prefer it without. Among these, again, is a subdivision of those who are for gradual, but not for immediate, and those who are for immediate, but not for gradual, extinction of slavery. It is easy to conceive that all these shades of opinion, and even more, may be sincerely entertained by honest and truthful men, yet, all being for the union, by reason of these differences each will prefer a different way of sustaining the union. At once sincerity is questioned and motives are assailed. Meanwhile, war coming, blood grows hot and blood is spilled. Thought is forced from old channels into confusion, deception breeds and thrives, confidence dies and universal suspicion reigns. Each man feels an impulse to kill his neighbor lest he be first killed by him, revenge and retaliation follow, and all this, as before said, may be among honest men only. But this is not all, every foul bird goes abroad and every dirty reptile rises up, and these add crime to confusion. Strong measures deemed indispensable but harsh at best such men

make worse by mild administration. Murders for old grudges and murders for pelf proceed, under any cloak that will best cover for the occasion. These causes amply account for what has occurred in Missouri without ascribing it to the weakness or wickedness of any General."

Here is the closing paragraph of a letter to James C. Conkling, written August 26, 1863:

"Peace does not appear so distant as it did. I hope it will come soon and come to stay, and so come as to be worth the keeping in all future time. It will then have been proved that among free men there can be no successful appeal from the ballot to the bullet, and that they who take such appeal are sure to lose their case and pay the cost. And then there will be some black men who can remember that with silent tongue and clenched teeth and steady eye and well-poised bayonet they have helped mankind on to this great consummation, while I fear there will be some white ones unable to forget that with malignant heart and deceitful speech they strove to hinder. Still let us not be over-sanguine of the speedy final triumph. Let us be quite sober. Let us diligently apply the means, never doubting that a just God in His own good time will give us the rightful result."

The measure of Lincoln's work and of his trials while president are to be considered in connection with a most impressive fact. He was the first man in the history of the world upon whom fell the large responsibilities of a great war under the conditions which the electric telegraph created; and I do not need to say that no president since his day has had to face the fierce responsibility which the Civil War brought to Lincoln.

This is a momentous fact and worthy of some attention. When we consider it in relation to our responsibilities, the history of modern society is a mighty and impressive and a fearful thing to contemplate.

When Rome was mistress of the known world, she was merely the nominal military and political dictator of hundreds of segregated communities, which felt the hand of the mistress only at rare moments. They ordinarily pursued their daily toil, married and were given in marriage, worked, lived and died unchanged and unmoved. The impulse originating in one set of communities was sluggishly imparted to its neighbor, and this still more sluggishly passed to the next. It was soon lost in the general inertia. Such may be said to be a fairly accurate description of the general conditions as they prevailed down to a very recent date.

But now society is so highly organized, its various segments are so delicately poised and correlated, that what touches one

part is felt throughout the sensitive and delicate structure. If there is strength in organization under modern conditions, there is also weakness. The strength may inhere in the organization as such, but its various members are so intimately associated that the number of the shocks which they are likely to receive is inconceivably multiplied and the vigor of the shock enormously emphasized. The consequences of this highly wrought organization of modern society are quite as interesting, we may believe, as organic life itself.

Imagine an organism composed of an infinite number of independent, isolated nerve centers, physically but nervelessly attached to each other. To touch or pierce one of them is its own concern. Its neighbors know it not and feel it not. The agglomerated mass might serve to protect the separate communities from the consequences of their separate weakness against assault, but beyond that their several parts have no concern one with the other. If we conceive, however, these nerve centers no longer independent or isolated, but attached by nerves each to its neighbor, the pain of one is the sensation of all; the life of one may depend upon the life of its neighbor. All suffer, all enjoy, together, if they be capable of such emotions. It is so with modern society, because it is so highly organized and because the electric current, the railroads and the press—especially the electric current—have made the emotions of one part simultaneously the possession of all. The result of this is an immense development of the influence, the power and, consequently, the responsibility of those whose conduct is calculated to have any influence at all.

In these days of the transmission of news by the electric current, (as it was in the days of Lincoln, and as it had been for a few years before), people are largely controlled by a common impulse, and those in responsibility are placed into actual and immediate contact with practically all of the fields upon which the activities of the responsible head are carried on.

When Rome sent an army to Gaul or to Asia, the general in command assumed and carried practically all of the responsibility of the conduct of his campaign, for the time soon came when he was out of reach of and out of touch with the head of the empire. He conducted his campaign in his own way. He waged battle in his own way. The actual responsibility for these fell upon him and not upon the head of the nation. Practically, this was true down to the Civil War, for it was only about that time that the use of the electric current for the instantaneous transmission of knowledge over long distances had become a practical part of civilization and of real use in time of war.

So that two forces may be said to have operated on Lincoln that had never before operated on any human being charged with

the grave responsibilities of war, one of them subjective and the other objective. By subjective, I mean the operation upon him of the public opinion of his people, who, being instantly informed of the results of the armies' operations in the front, or of the determinations of the president, as instantly returned to the president the expression of their approval or disapproval. And objectively, in that the president's knowledge, through the transmission of messages by the electric wire, placed upon him, in very large degree, the immediate responsibility for the manner of carrying on campaigns and even of conducting separate battles. So it was that in these two senses, responsibility and answerability to the people, and responsibility for the military operations immediately carried on by his general, a great and unprecedented burden was placed upon him.

Let me illustrate the gravity of this responsibility by an observation or two. The people are controlling only when they act by a common impulse at the same moment. The heart of the people must be unified in a common purpose if it would accomplish that purpose. But it can be thus unified only by receiving the impelling intelligence simultaneously, so that the popular outburst is universal over the affected area. There can be no unity of the national heart unless it can be moved and can itself move instantaneously. If the heart of one community was touched last month, it may be chilled and dulled to-day when the heart of another community is touched by the same cause. There can, therefore, be no concert of emotion and no resulting concert of persuasive and compelling action. In 1793, if a great popular agitation aroused the public heart and conscience of Philadelphia and framed its judgment, this intellectual and moral movement sluggishly followed the popular nerve to Boston and thrilled its heart as Philadelphia's had been thrilled. In three or four weeks, along the same sluggish public nerve, came to Philadelphia Boston's response, but by this time, doubtless, unless the moving cause was of the greatest import, the ardor of Philadelphia's convictions had chilled and reaction had sapped the fount of enthusiasm. If the original impulse was the public policy of Washington, it would have recovered from the first onset of public opinion and would be armed to meet the second.

Not so, as I have indicated, in Lincoln's day. The telegraph has, as it were, syndicated popular emotions. There is a unity of the popular heart where before was segregation. The practical resulting effect is, as I have said, that those in positions of high responsibility are sensible of that responsibility and are sensitive to the public will, and in moments of real and great popular passion, when misguided, are subject to the greatest strain upon their wisdom, their patience and their courage.

If we add to the difficulties and dangers attendant upon this kind of personal responsibility immediately exercised upon the people themselves, the responsibility for the conduct of war, because the captains in the field are in telegraphic communication with the commander in chief at Washington, we begin to realize to some extent how tremendous was the labor which was laid upon the willing shoulders of Lincoln. Thus do mere physical facts control the destiny of men and multiply the potentiality of new emotions and popular impulses.

Lincoln, added to his other virtues, was most tactful and diplomatic in his management of men. And this was indeed marvelous, that a man sprung from such lowly origin, without training in the art of diplomacy or of social functions, yet showed himself to be a master of all, especially the master of those who were past masters in the arts of diplomacy and polite literature.

When Mr. Seward, himself a most polished scholar and writer, locked horns with Lincoln respecting the closing paragraph of the first inaugural address, it was Seward who yielded, and the literary world has ever since admired Lincoln's splendid lines.

When Seward resigned, chiefly because of want of sympathy between himself and Chase, Lincoln it was who so managed matters as to have Chase tender his resignation also. Then, with an adroitness that Tallyrand might have emulated, he addressed them a joint letter in which he stated that the public interest would not permit the resignation of either, and requested that they resume the duties of their respective departments. There was nothing for these two great men to do but to resume and a vital cabinet crisis was passed.

Lincoln knew how to deal with the smallness as well as the greatness of men. Nowhere were his strength and courage more apparent than in respect to the Proclamation of Emancipation. It was opposed by nearly every member of the cabinet. This to a conciliatory and modest man like Lincoln meant much. With whom could he counsel if not with his cabinet? And so he took counsel of his conscience and his God. When the cabinet met on the 22nd of September, 1862, he said:

"When the rebel army was at Frederick, I determined, as soon as it should be driven out of Maryland, to issue a proclamation of emancipation, such as I thought most likely to be useful. I said nothing to any one, but I made the promise to myself and to my Maker. The rebel army is now driven out, and I am going to fulfil that promise. I have got you together to hear what I have written down. I do not wish your advice about the main matter, for that I have determined for myself."

I think the Proclamation of Emancipation marks the moral zenith of the great commoner's career. All before it was but preliminary and introductory; all after it was but to give effect to that crowning act.

I wonder what Lincoln would think and what he would say, in view of this proclamation, if he were among us at this hour. Consider what has happened. The negro, it is true, has progressed much in the last forty years; but is he where or what Lincoln meant him to be? As I look on him, in these early days of the twentieth century, the enfranchised and disenthralled American negro is the most pathetic figure in history. The fruits of his emancipation have fallen far short of his and our just expectations and of his deserts. Bitter is the cup which he has been made to drink. Such is his political and social situation that he is handicapped, turn which way he will. No avenue of life is truly open to him. Merit and industry will not as surely to him as to others bring their just reward. The doors are closed. If he obtains preferment, he obtains it almost by chance. The barriers before him are practically insurmountable. When he begins the race of life, it is but a limited horizon which bounds the reasonable possibilities of his achievement. Bright hopes which he harbored a generation ago have turned to ashes, and he has tasted the bitter fruits of social and political ostracism, and these are sometimes worse than fire and sword, or plague and famine. I am not here to say that this could have been different. I mention only the pathetic fact.

How shall we truly behold Lincoln? Not as the plowboy or the rail-splitter, for, through the mists of the morning, his patient face looms and looks out, and we see the suffering eyes of the martyr president of his martyrdom. Nor yet as a debater, for, through the periods of his eloquence and the very vigor of his attack, we see the pathos of the mournful soul and we hear the echo of sounds not mortal. It is a figure—a composite figure—that we see. It is rather a poem than a story. We feel the uplift of a giant heart with a tender soul. The woman is there—the soul of woman in the form of man—and in it ever the heart that bleeds and the tongue that soothes. If ever a man was Heaven-sent, Abraham Lincoln was Heaven's special gift to mankind. At the instant of fate, he seems to have drifted out from the depths of the Great Beyond into the pregnant Now, and his figure, sublime in the day that he brought, throws a shadow serene and helpful down the endless aisle that we call Time. The scorching rays of the noonday sun that fattened the tyrant and blistered the sons that smell of the soil, his shade softened and turned to the genial warmth of life worth living and hope worth having.

Oh, Lincoln! Blessed is the country that owns your name and fame. Happy are the people from which you sprung. Your life justifies the birth of the republic. Your career ripened the experiment of self-government into a demonstration. You settled the all-controlling fact that government of the people, by the people and for the people was not only the best, but that the best government springs from the very body of the people. Lincoln, you builded better than you knew. You not only freed three million slaves; you broke the shackles from all the world and taught all men how to be free and how to govern. Peace be to your ashes and eternal honor to your name.

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